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STATE FOR EUR/NCE; CALEB MCCARRY, WHA/CCA

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SUBJECT: CZECHS VIEWS ON EVOLVING EU CUBA POLICY

Classified By: A/DCM Michael Dodman for reasons 1.4 b+d.

¶1. (C) A/DCM met February 17 with Jakub Skalnik, Czech MFA Director for the Americas, to discuss a range of issues, including Cuba policy. Skalnik, a self-professed hardliner on Cuba, said he hoped the Czechs would join with Poland, Slovakia, and possibly the Germans and the Dutch, in making the EU recognize the Castro regime has not responded to dialogue, and the human rights situation is further deteriorating. He hoped that this year's review of the EU's Cuba policy would produce agreement on a statement clearly condemning the regime and calling for the immediate release of all political prisoners, but was guarded in his level of optimism. He noted that sentiment among EU members on Cuba appeared to be moderating, i.e., there is less support for the Spanish position, but that the consensus was still far from the Czech position.

¶2. (C) Skalnik outlined his thoughts for the March 7 COLAT meeting, ideas which he will first clear with FM Svoboda, another committed foe of the Castro regime. In recent days the Austrian EU Presidency had proposed to member states a compromise position on the issue of dissident attendance at national day celebrations in Havana. Under the Austrian proposal, each mission would hold two receptions: the first for the diplomatic corps, EU nationals, and host government officials; and the second for civil society, and members of the opposition. Skalnik said the Czechs oppose this proposal, recognizing that under such a system the first reception would be the "real one" and the other would have diminished status. Skalnik, although he believes that national day celebrations are a matter for each individual member state, said he is prepared to accept a 2-reception solution if the civil society and opposition leaders were invited to join the diplomatic corps and EU citizens, and Cuban officials were the ones relegated to a separate reception. He thought the Slovaks would also support this position, but was less certain about the Poles. Another element of the Czech position is likely to be agreement that if one country breaks with the EU common practice on national day reception, none of the other countries would be bound by them.

¶3. (C) Comment: Skalnik, still relatively new as Director for the Americas, is actively seeking new ways to move the Cuba issue forward. He will accompany Czech Deputy Foreign Minister Tomas Pojar to a February 21 conference in Miami of regional Czech Ambassadors, which will include extended discussion on ways forward in both Cuba and Venezuela. Following this conference, Pojar will visit Washington for consultations.

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